The Fourth Church Pulpit

ALL THINGS BRIGHT AND BEAUTIFUL

June 27, 1993

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: Genesis 1:20-27, Matthew 6:25-33

"And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: . . .'"
Genesis 1:24 (NRSV)

Some stunning theology has been in the air and on the news recently.

First, a little more than a week ago Charles Barkley made the extraordinary assertion that he had a personal conversation with God, and God told him that it was the divine will that the Phoenix Suns should prevail over the Chicago Bulls.

There was no response, as far as I know, from the theological faculty of the University of Chicago. But after the Bulls prevailed last Sunday — someone did "step up" theologically on Monday morning. The "Saturday Night Live Bulls/Bears fans" responded: "Charles, the next time you want to talk to God, dial 312!" Extraordinary!

But no less extraordinary than this . . .

> "All things bright and beautiful
> All creatures great and small
> All things wise and wonderful
> The Lord God made them all"

James Herriot chose that refrain from a 19th century British children's hymn for the titles in his very popular sequence of books about life as a veterinarian in the Yorkshire, in the ruggedly beautiful Northeast of England. I read them and loved them all, and like thousands of Americans, apparently, the first chance I got, headed to Yorkshire to see what he was talking about.

I had never heard the hymn before. We never sang it where I went to Sunday School, but I'll never forget the first time I heard it sung . . . "times" is more accurate because I heard it every day for a week. It was fifteen years ago and we had just arrived in a Scottish town, not far actually from Yorkshire, where we would live and I would serve as the pastor for the summer. It was the last week of school and my first duty was to visit and speak briefly at five elementary school assemblies. And at each one of those assemblies, the proceedings closed with the children singing their favorite hymn for me — "All things bright and beautiful." So, I've heard it the way it was written to be sung, by dear little British children, rosy cheeks and all.

The hymn and Herriot's books and actually seeing Herriot's Yorkshire have continued to run and rerun in my memory, I am convinced, because of the way the hymn combines a lilting, innocent, childlike melody with the most extraordinary and astonishing claim —

> "All creatures great and small. . .
> The Lord God made them all."

Since that hymn was written the world has undergone a scientific revolution and a knowledge explosion. Cecil Frances Alexander wrote the words in 1848, back on the other side of an event that defines her era as literally another world. Ten years after the hymn Charles Darwin returned from circumnavigating the globe on board the HMS Beagle, carefully observing and recording species of plants and animals and published a book, *The Origin of the Species.* That book set off a raging debate not only about his scientific theories, but about the way his ideas seemed to contradict the story of creation in the Bible, at least the timing. Darwin himself did not believe there was a conflict between his ideas of evolution and the Biblical proclamation of divine creation.

And even though the debate rages on, with creationists insisting that Genesis 1 is good science, there are plenty of us who agree that there is not only no conflict between religion and science, but that scientific inquiry into the nature of things is itself a holy venture.

Did you notice in the paper that there is a debate scheduled tonight at a suburban mega church between a famous atheist and a defender of the faith and that the atheist wants to start the debate by talking about evolution, as if you can't stand in wide-eyed wonder before what science knows and at the same time believe in God. It's a non-issue. Science enhances our sense of awe before the created order. And today, the astronomers, physicists, biologists — Robert Jastrow, Stephen Hawking, Lewis Thomas — point to the mystery, the simple fact that the more we discover the more we realize how much we don't know about the world. Jastrow and Hawking are candid in explaining in layperson's terms that when the physicists concluded a few decades ago that the universe was expanding outward at the speed of light, and so it had to have a beginning — a big bang, or a great light, a moment before which it did not exist and after which it has existed in an expanding infinity; with that conclusion the physicists had a problem. Why did it happen? What was there before it happened? *Time Magazine* said in a feature on astronomy, that in the idea of Black Holes physics and metaphysics, science and religion converge.

And Lewis Thomas, the biologist, says that for awe and reverence, nothing beats meditating on that single cell — that for some unknown reason switches on and evolves into a human brain.

So we've come a long way on the science and religion frontier, from innocent faith, to intellectual skepticism and back to awe, wonder and mystery.

The hymn makes an even more astonishing assertion. God creates well. The creation is good. . . . But if the physicists are correct and the universe is expanding, and if Darwin was only partially correct that life evolves from simple to more complex forms, then creation is still happening in front of our eyes. The hymn suggests that you and I can trust the process because the creator is trustworthy.

Those are powerful assertions and they cut to the heart of our deepest longings and hopes and fears. They address the fundamental questions of human existence and human destiny.

They appear, appropriately enough, on the very first page of the Bible — the story of creation. We know now that the story was written not to help people understand the origin of things, but to help them live in a very threatening situation. We know that Genesis 1 is not science but pastoral care. The people of Israel are in exile in the 6th century B. C.

Their survival is in doubt. Their religion and culture and future all seem like naive, fragile dreams. "How shall we live?" they were asking. "How shall we survive?" And for their survival, their courage and their hope this wonderful account was written.

What you really need to know when your very survival is at stake is that things are not ultimately out of control, that regardless of how bad the immediate prospects appear, the big picture is a hopeful one, that even though this day may be your last, there is one in whose gracious and loving hands you may place your hope, your life itself.

That's what this story of creation is about . . . a creator God who loves the creation, who has created all things well, all creatures great and small.

In the rarefied atmosphere of academic Biblical study and research there is a new awareness that there are actually two major ideas or theologies in the Bible. They are called the theology of redemption and the theology of blessing. We know the theology of redemption best. It goes like this: we are sinners. God provides for sin in the death of Jesus Christ. We are saved by his cross and resurrection and we are made new by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament, the theology of redemption is represented by the scape goat on whom the sins of the people are placed . . . and then by the covenant and the law of Moses, the life of faithful obedience.

But alongside this theology of redemption is the theology of blessing. It affirms the creation is good: that in addition to human sin, there is human glory and dominion: that the goal of human life is to live fully and completely, to enjoy the gifts of creation, to rejoice in life and to be grateful, to "enjoy God," as the 17th century Presbyterians who wrote the Shorter Catechism, bravely asserted. It is, they said, our "chief end."

The whole notion of a Sabbath on the seventh day of creation is not for the purpose of restricting activity as an end in itself. It is not even to allow God to recover from the strenuous work of creation. It is an opportunity for God to enjoy, to delight in the creation. To rest in God on the Sabbath is to take delight in being human.

The two themes live side by side in the Bible and serve as correctives to each other. When religion forgets the theology of redemption it wanders off into pleasant abstraction and new age platitudes about reconnecting with the earth. When religion forgets the theology of blessing it becomes a narrow, legalistic set of dos and don'ts, empty of joy, as has frequently occurred in our own tradition. The Puritans, for instance, who it is said were deathly afraid that somewhere someone was having a good time.

Each theology contains truth about God. God is judge and savior, but God is also a loving parent and benevolent creator. Both notions are part of the truth we believe.

The idea appears in the New Testament, in the text this morning from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The background is similar to the exile situation. This time they are exiles in their own land. People are wondering about their survival. Things don't look very hopeful for Jewish peasants in Galilee during the period of Roman occupation. Things don't look rosy for their nation, nor for their families, their very lives.

When people are frightened, when their survival is at stake, they start to clutch and grasp at whatever seems to promise security, safety, survival. Sometimes it is money or power or influence. Sometimes it's religion. There is an identifiable pattern in Biblical history: when people are anxious, frightened about their survival, they start to become zealous about religious law. . . as if keeping all the rules and regulations will somehow guarantee survival.

"Consider the birds" Jesus said. "Consider the lilies." It was an invitation to trust God with the future, to open one's hands and heart to God's love.

He was right, of course. Fear paralyzes. Fear renders us incapable of doing what is good and right. Fear inhibits life itself. An attack of severe anxiety is often accomplished by shortness of breath, the panicked sense that "I can't breath," which, of course, creates new waves of anxiety.

It has broad societal implications. The late Dorothy Day who gave her life to the Catholic Worker Movement running soup kitchens in the Bowery, said:

> "One of the greatest evils of our day is a sense of futility. Young people say, 'What good can one person do? What is the sense in our small effort?'"

Anxiety about the future paralyzes and forces us to grasp at anything that promises security. A youngster at Cabrini, looking out at a very dismal world of poverty and unemployment, pulls in his or her hopes for the future and starts saying, "if I grow up," not "when," and turns to drugs, a gang, a gun, as the only visible security.

Bill Coffin quipped one time that the human dilemma is simply that our need for security always outstrips our ability to provide it. There is never enough. He wrote:

> "Before the awesome terrors of the world every human heart quakes. Every human being tries desperately to secure himself against his insecurity . . . by gaining more power, more money, more virtue, more health." [*Courage to Love*, p. 11]

And University of Chicago Professor of Theology, Langdon Gilkey, used to teach that modern life has taken away most of the securities our forebears enjoyed: intellectual certainty, a sense of national omnipotence and rightness, uninterrupted, unthreatened financial growth. We've had to learn to adjust to insecurity, and Gilkey suggested that much of our behavior is an expression of our desperate need to establish some safety zone. Even the arguments and jockeying for position in a theological faculty were expressions of our need for some place when we have enough power and influence to be secure.

Jesus invited his followers to live differently, and the day he told them to "consider the lilies and the birds," he was drawing from the deep well of his own spiritual tradition — all the way back to the theology of blessing in the creation story. Trust God he was saying . . . the God of creation is trustworthy.

Who doesn't need that . . . to live in the freedom of God's gracious love, to live without fear, to live fully and gracefully even in the face of our own mortality?

In fact, the fear of that — our mortality — lies beneath all our fears. In fact, you and I don't know how much more of this precious life we will live: and the fear, the anxiety can be a kind of lonely exile, robbing life of all joy.

Thomas Merton advised taking a walk in a garden. I find a trip to the zoo spiritually therapeutic.

William Blalee wrote:

> "Tiger, tiger, burning bright.
> In the forests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
>
> "When the stars threw down their spears,
> And water'd heaven with their tears,
> Did he smile his work to see?
> Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

The late Karl Barth, when he was 82 and critically ill, wrote:

> "In retrospect, I have no serious complaint, except my failure to be grateful. Perhaps I have some difficult days ahead, and sooner or later I have the day of my death. What remains for me in relation to all my days, and finally that last day (is) that I should constantly hold up before me and impress on myself: 'Forget not all his benefits.'" [see Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nature, God and Pulpit*, p. 39]

In this week of basketball mania, someone sent me an article about another basketball personality who died recently — Jim Valvano. He was the coach at the North Carolina State University when they won the NCAA championship ten years ago. He was a good coach, built a fine program. He was irrepressible, unpredictable. Basketball fans will never forget his pure exuberant joy when his team won the final game, running around the court, throwing himself into the arms of his much taller players. There was scandal in his program and he left, but instead of hiding, Valvano took a job with ABC and ESPN and became a good announcer. And then he was diagnosed with a particularly virulent cancer. Again, instead of retreating and becoming a recluse, he decided to play it out; stayed with his work through chemotherapy and radiation, lost forty pounds. Just a few weeks before he died he was given the Arthur Ashe Award for Courage. At the banquet he had to be helped up onto the stage to deliver his acceptance speech. Instead of talking about athletic victories, he talked about what his mortality had taught him about living.

> "We should do this every day of our lives," he said. "Number one is, laugh. You should laugh every day. Number two is think. You should spend some time in thought. Number three is, you should have your emotions moved to tears."

It could be grief. It could be anger over what's wrong with the world — why children die in Bosnia or Cabrini Green. But it also could be tears of happiness and joy: the miracle that someone still loves you, that you have beautiful children or wonderful friends.

> "If you laugh, you think, you cry," he said, "that's a full day."

And, I would add, a good day, a day blessed by the creation and by the Creator. A day lived in the spirit of the one who said, "Consider the lilies . . . consider the birds." A day lived in the love of the one who created us for life, the one who . . .

> "All things bright and beautiful,
> All creatures great and small,
> All things wise and wonderful;
> The Lord God made them all."
>
> Amen.